

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: 1955 Revisited: Lessons for South Korea Today

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Sun Myung Moon in 1954 and Hak Ja Han in August 2026

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The lessons of 1955: When religious prejudice becomes state policy as seen in today's state-orchestrated persecution of Mother Han and the Family Federation

The story of the 1955 [Unification Church](#) controversy (1955년 통일교 사건) did not end when [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) was acquitted. In some respects, that was when its most consequential chapter began.

See also [Mother Han's Case Echoing a 1955 Religious Trial](#)



Wolli Haeseol (Explanation of the Principles), published in 1957 in Korean. Not translated into English

A 6th October 2026 [article](#) by Protestant scholar Bae Deok-man (배덕만) in OhmyNews presents the episode not simply as a confrontation between an established Christian majority and a controversial new movement, but as a turning point in the development of Korean Protestantism itself. The professors and students who were expelled from Ewha Womans University and Yonsei University did not simply disappear from the history of the Protestant movement. Many remained committed to their new faith, and several subsequently played important roles in its doctrinal development, missionary expansion and institutional growth.

According to [Bae's article](#), this is one of the most revealing aspects of the historical episode.

In 1954, missionary activity among students and professors at Ewha and Yonsei had brought the [Unification Church](#) into direct contact with highly educated members of established Protestantism. Some of them were initially asked to investigate the new religion precisely because university authorities were concerned about its influence. Yet the investigation did not always produce the intended result.

Professor Kim Yeong-oon (김영운 - aka. Young Oon Kim), for example, was introduced to [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) and became deeply impressed by him and by the Explanation of the Principles (원리해설), which was then being written as a new interpretation of the 66 books of the Bible. She subsequently became a believer and refused repeated requests to renounce her new faith.

The same pattern occurred at Yonsei. Professor Park Sang-rae (박상래) became involved with the [new religious movement](#) after being introduced through Ewha Professor Yang Yun-yeong (양윤영). Park subsequently taught its ideas to students through individual meetings and small Bible-study groups. When university authorities investigated the situation and urged her to abandon her affiliation, she refused. She was eventually dismissed, and students who likewise refused to leave the [Unification Church](#) were expelled.



Sent by university authorities to investigate the [Unification Church](#): Dr. Young Oon Kim (Kim Yeong-oon), here in the Summer of 1956 in Seoul



Key person for translating the teachings into English: Professor Choi Won-bok, here in the early 1960s in Seoul

From the perspective of the institutions taking disciplinary action, these measures may have appeared to be necessary to defend theological orthodoxy. From the perspective of religious liberty, however, they raised a more difficult question: **how far may a religiously affiliated educational institution go in controlling the religious convictions of its professors and students?**

That question remains relevant in contemporary South Korea.

The 1955 controversy demonstrated that exclusion can have consequences very different from those intended by its architects. Rather than eliminating the [movement](#) of [Sun Myung Moon](#), the dismissals and expulsions contributed to its separation from established Protestantism. [Bae Deok-man](#) (배덕만) argues that relations between the [Unification Church](#) and established Protestant denominations were subsequently severed, pushing the [movement](#) to develop as an independent new religion rather than as a current within Korean Christianity.

The expelled academics also contributed directly to that development. Kim Yeong-oon (김영운) became the first missionary sent to the United States in 1959 and played an important role in translating the English edition of the [Unification Principles](#). Yang Yun-yeong (양윤영) contributed to early hymns and musical activities, while [Choi Won-bok](#) (최원복) became involved in publication, external relations, English-language publishing and translation. Park Sang-rae (박상래) worked for a period as a doctrinal researcher and theological adviser.

The students expelled from Ewha likewise became part of the [movement](#)'s early leadership. According to [Bae](#), many remained in the [Unification Church](#) and included members of the "36 Couples" [blessed in marriage](#) in 1961. In later decades, former students assumed senior positions in educational institutions, media, business and other organizations associated with the [movement](#).

Thus, as the [OhmyNews article](#) points out, an attempt to contain a religious movement ultimately helped provide it with intellectual, theological and organizational resources.

This historical irony deserves consideration amid today's confrontation between the South Korean authorities and the [Family Federation](#). The present dispute is obviously not identical to the [events of 1955](#). The contemporary allegations concern specific questions of unlawful and political conduct, while the earlier conflict centred heavily on theology, university discipline and fears about a new religion. Those differences should not be ignored.

Yet the broader principle is relevant. A society's treatment of a persecuted religion can influence the very development of that religion. Attempts to marginalize, stigmatize or suppress a movement may strengthen its sense of separation from the religious mainstream and create a powerful narrative of persecution.

There is another striking parallel. In the late 1950s, major Protestant denominations formally designated the [Unification Church](#) as "heresy" and instructed their members to avoid association with it. Today, religious leaders remain influential voices in debates about how the [Family Federation](#) should be treated

by the state.

That makes the words of Christian leaders particularly important. When religious condemnation moves beyond theological disagreement and becomes an argument for state action against another religious organization, the distinction between religious judgment and governmental coercion becomes crucial.

The [history of 1955](#) suggests why.

A movement that was expected to be defeated by dismissals, expulsions and criminal proceedings instead developed into an international religious organization. The controversy brought it unprecedented public attention, supplied some of its future leaders and accelerated its separation from established Protestantism.

[Bae Deok-man's account](#) therefore provides more than a history of an old religious controversy. It raises a question with contemporary relevance: when established religious institutions seek the exclusion of a minority faith, do they protect society - or do they unintentionally contribute to the minority's transformation and growth?

That question is worth asking before history is allowed to repeat itself.

See also [Mother Han's Case Echoing a 1955 Religious Trial](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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South Korea today is taking place against a strikingly familiar historical background. More than seven decades ago, in 1955, the founder of what was then a small and persecuted **new religious movement** was arrested, imprisoned and put on trial amid intense public accusations concerning his faith and the conduct of his followers. After approximately three months in detention, **Sun Myung Moon** (문선명) was acquitted of all the charges against him and released. Yet the damage caused by the campaign surrounding his arrest went far beyond the courtroom. It helped establish a pattern in which religious controversy, hostile media coverage and pressure from established Christian institutions became intertwined.

See also [1955 Revisited: Lessons for South Korea Today](#)

See also [70 Years On: Detention History Repeats Itself](#)

A 6th October 2026 [article](#) by Christian scholar Bae Deok-man (배덕만) in *OhmyNews* provides an unusually detailed account of this formative episode.

Writing from within the Protestant tradition, Bae examines what he calls the "1955 Unificationism Incident" (1955년 통일교 사건) as part of the broader history of Korean Protestantism. His approach is notably historical rather than polemical. Instead of simply repeating the accusations made against the **religious movement**, he traces how the controversy developed and what consequences it produced.

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The logo of *OhmyNews*. In smaller writing, reflecting the citizen journalism policy, it says, "All citizens are reporters". [Public domain image](#)



Played a key role in outreach activities at Ewha and Yonsei: Full-time lecturer Yang Yun-yeong (양윤영). Through her, several other professors joined the **Unification Church** in 1954 and early 1955. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

The confrontation began before **Sun Myung Moon** himself was arrested. During 1954 and early 1955, the **movement** expanded its missionary activity among students and professors at *Ewha Womans University* and *Yonsei University*. Several academics became followers, including professors Yang Yun-yeong (양윤영), Han Chung-hwa (한중화) Kim Young-oon (김영운 – Young Oon Kim), **Choi Won-bok** (최원복), and Lee Jeong-ho (이정호) from Ewha and Professor Park Sang-rae (박상래) from Yonsei. When university authorities discovered their involvement, they were urged to abandon the new faith. They refused. In March 1955, the professors were dismissed and 16 students (14 from Ewha and 2 from Yonsei) who refused to leave the **movement** were subsequently expelled.

This aspect of the story is particularly significant from the perspective of religious freedom. The controversy was not confined to theological disagreement. It involved institutional decisions to remove people from their academic positions because of their religious affiliation and convictions.

Bae notes that the large South Korean newspaper *Dong-A Ilbo* criticized these actions, arguing that dismissing professors and expelling

students on religious grounds, without a basis in school regulations or law, could infringe both religious freedom and academic freedom.

The reaction of established Protestantism was nevertheless increasingly severe. The **new movement's** theology challenged central assumptions of established churches. It taught that Christ

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The logo of the *Dong-a Ilbo*

central assumption of Christianized enlightenment is that all men had completed spiritual salvation through the Cross but that “physical salvation” remained unfinished, requiring the Second Coming and a new revelation – the “[Principles](#)” – to interpret the Bible. Rumors surrounding the [movement](#), including sensational allegations concerning its teachings and the conduct of its members, further intensified the controversy.



From a hearing at Seoul District Court on 20th September 1955 where [Sun Myung Moon](#) and four of his followers stood trial. From left, Kim Won-pil (김원필), Yu Hyo-won (유효원), Yu Hyo-min (유호민), [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명). Yu Hyo-young (유효영) is not in this photo but was also in the line-up. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Against this background, [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) was taken into detention on 4th July 1955, together with four followers. The charges included violations of the *Military Service Act* and disturbing public morals. The case was presented to the public as another dramatic confrontation with the controversial new religion. Yet the judicial outcome was strikingly different from the public atmosphere surrounding the arrest. After approximately three months in detention and trial, [Moon](#) was found **not guilty on all charges**. The others arrested with him received only relatively light sentences for matters such as *Military Service Act* violations or document forgery – not for the sensational allegations concerning a “cult” or sexual misconduct.

The episode nevertheless had a lasting impact. Rather than disappearing, the [movement](#) became more visible. Extensive media attention increased public awareness, while criticism from established denominations intensified. The 1955 confrontation therefore became a formative moment in the emergence of [Unificationism](#) as an independent religious movement.

The historical parallel with the treatment of the [Family Federation](#) under the present South Korean administration should therefore be approached carefully. The circumstances are obviously different. South Korea in 1955 was a very different political and institutional environment, and today’s legal proceedings involve allegations that must be assessed through the contemporary judicial process. Yet the underlying question remains recognizable: **what happens when a minority religious movement becomes the object of intense political, media and religious hostility?**

That question has particular resonance when a religious leader is detained before being convicted. Detention can have consequences that extend far beyond the eventual verdict. Public reputation may be damaged, organizational activities disrupted and the presumption of innocence weakened in the eyes of society.

The story of 1955 offers an important reminder. Accusations can create enormous public pressure long before a court determines whether the underlying criminal charges are proven. In [Sun Myung Moon](#)’s case, the historical record described by Bae Deok-man (배덕만) ultimately produced an acquittal. Yet the controversy surrounding his arrest became one of the decisive events in the history of the movement.

Seventy-one years later, the question of how South Korea treats a

persecuted religious minority is again attracting national and international attention. The lesson of 1955 is not that contemporary allegations should be ignored. It is that **religious controversy must not be allowed to substitute for evidence, and public hostility must never become a substitute for due process.**

See also [1955 Revisited: Lessons for South Korea Today](#)

See also [70 Years On: Detention History Repeats Itself](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: [Father Moon](#) with students from Ewha Woman's University in Seoul in 1955, expelled from their studies because of their newfound faith. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

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